Well-being Consciousness and College Access Borderlands: Staff Perspectives on Supporting Students' Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

There are more than 2,500 pre-college preparation and college access programs in the United States designed to increase postsecondary enrollment and degree obtainment rates for historically underrepresented college students, including low-income and Students of Color. Less known is how these programs address the social, emotional, and well-being needs of Black and Indigenous college-going students, who often enroll at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Guided by Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory, this study analyzed interviews from five current and former college access program staff to uncover if and how college access programs define and implement well-being into college-going initiatives. Findings revealed varied racialized and gendered conceptions and expectations of well-being as well as competing outcome-based threats to developing a well-being consciousness. This study contributes new scholarship on the cultivation of well-being in college access spaces from the perspective of college access staff.

Keywords: well-being, college access, college-going, social-emotional, support

Although Black[1] women enroll in colleges at high rates by race and gender, they lag other groups in college completion (National Center of Education Statistics, 2020). Additionally, due to low numbers, Indigenous[2] students are often left out of national statistics and data sets (De Bray et al., 2019; Keene, 2016; Waterman et al., 2018). However, there is evidence that Native American women also enroll and graduate from higher education at higher rates than men, yet within and between group disparities still exist in high school graduation and college-going rates (DeVoe & Darling-Churchill, 2008; McKillip & Mackey, 2013). To address postsecondary enrollment disparities, college access programs were created to increase postsecondary enrollment and degree attainment for historically

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[1]
Black is a racial categorization of people based on broad phenotype characteristics and African ancestral origins. I primarily use Black in this paper but may also use African American when the literature is ethnic-specific to those born in the United States and descended from African ancestors who were taken and enslaved in the United States.

[2]
I mainly use Indigenous in this paper but will also include Native American and American Indian to include many diverse populations Indigenous to the Americas. Whenever possible, I utilize the name of the tribal affiliation or the preferred terminology of the community I work with, acknowledging nation sovereignty and the diversity of culture, language, and histories within Indigenous populations.

underrepresented college students, including low-income and students of color (Domina, 2009). However, less is known about how these programs support other notions of postsecondary success, including well-being. While college-bound Black and Indigenous students face different cultural and ethnic challenges, their navigation of higher education intersects in significant ways, with interlinked and complex historical and traumatic legacies of antiblackness and settler colonialism (Mays, 2021; Ototivo, 2017; Pyawasay, 2017; Smith et al., 2019). Additionally, research suggests gender differences in well-being experiences (Brocato et al., 2021; Gallup, 2015, 2019), which warrants additional exploration of Black and Indigenous educational experiences.

In this study, I explore how college access staff members support and prepare college-going Black and Indigenous young women to be well in college. Guided by Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory (1987), this research asks: how and to what extent college access program staff conceptualize and use well-being consciousness to prepare Black and Indigenous students for higher education? Analyzing interview data from five college access staff, I found that staff noticed an increased need for social and emotional support for students, but faced several challenges in addressing these needs, including lack of training, time, capacity, and competing with evaluative and external pressures. I argue that college-access spaces resemble a "cultural Borderland" between the

organization, the students, and the partnering colleges and universities. This study offers several important contributions to the college access literature. First, it expands knowledge of pre-collegiate preparation, emphasizing well-being cultivation among college access staff at federal, state, and private programs and organizations. Second, this study utilizes qualitative analysis that considers race and gender when framing well-being within college access spaces. Third, this study highlights the perspectives and experiences of program staff.

Literature Review

More than 2,550 pre-college preparation and college access programs exist in the United States (National Association for College Admissions Counseling, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.), and a growing body of mostly quantitative studies evaluate how college access programs shape college enrollment outcomes (Domina, 2009; Greenberg, 2003; Gullatt & Jan, 2003; Knaggs et al., 2015; Perna, 2015). However, college access literature lacks consistent empirical evidence on program effectiveness, and few use well-being assessment as an indicator of college success. With some notable exceptions (see Keene, 2016; Muñiz, 2019; Waterman et al., 2018), empirical qualitative research scarcely includes culturally-relevant well-being within college access literature. Additionally, not much literature considers the process of well-being and social and emotional development from the perspective

of program staff, who are often tasked with implementing organizational goals and initiatives (Swail & Perna, 2002).

College Access Program Effectiveness

Disparities around college enrollment and retainment of Black and Indigenous students persist, and college access initiatives typically focus on the college's academic, financial, and social aspects (Gullatt & Jan, 2003; Perna, 2015). Designed to increase social capital, college enrollment, and completion rates, college access programs believe that direct student intervention can provide support and access to the "hidden curriculum," or the unwritten rules, beliefs, and behaviors that lead to student success (Gullatt & Jan, 2003). Federally funded college access programs such as TRIO (e.g., Talent Search and Upward Bound) and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (commonly known as GEAR UP) prepare low-income and minoritized students for college success and implement individual and school-based interventions through a social capital, theoretical orientation. (Gullatt & Jan, 2003). These initiatives attempt to tackle the "social construction of the education system" (Walsh, 2011, p. 371), which are heavily associated with inequity by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Bankston & Zhou; 2002; Walsh, 2011).

The research regarding the effectiveness of college access programs indicates mixed and sometimes contradictory results (Domina, 2009; Gaullatt & Jan, 2003; Walsh, 2011). For example, several studies reveal no significant differences in outcomes between program participants and non-participants (Domina, 2009; Walsh, 2011). Other studies suggest that college programs such as GEAR UP and TRIO can increase college enrollment, attendance, and persistence (Knaggs et al., 2015; Perna, 2015), particularly for those who start with lower academic expectations (Perna, 2015; Gullatt & Jan, 2003). Additional work by Walsh (2011) finds that program participation in Upward Bound and Talent Search minimally, but not statistically significantly, benefits low socio-economic and impoverished Black and Hispanic students. However, there is growing qualitative scholarship on how successful college access spaces adopt or develop culturally relevant values to support the unique populations they serve (Waterman et al., 2018; Welton & Martinez, 2014; Youngbull, 2018). Most importantly, research does not often include or measure well-being as a necessary component within college access spaces, especially within quantitative survey or evaluation research.

Behavioral and Psychosocial Skill Development

College access services that help students acquire behavioral and psychosocial skills to successfully integrate into college campus life are relatively common, with reported programming focusing on social skills and leadership development (Swail & Perna, 2002). Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a dominant psychosocial skill development framework in education, and there is

extensive and ever-growing research that addresses in-school SEL interventions at the K-12 level (Durlak et al., 2011; Elias et al., 1997; Greenberg et al., 2003; Jones & Kahn, 2017). The main goal of SEL is to manage interpersonal situations, make responsible decisions, manage emotions, appreciate the perspectives of others, and have positive relationships (CASEL, 2017; Elias et al., 1997). Research suggests that interventions that target SEL skills can positively impact academic, social, and health outcomes (Beyer, 2017; Greenberg et al., 2003; Muñiz, 2019). However, original conceptions of SEL have been critiqued for their lack of addressing systemic inequities that threaten social and emotional health, such as race-evasive perspectives that do not consider racism and race-related stress (Beyer; 2017; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Rogers et al., 2022). Others critique SEL as a classroom management tool to minimize disruption and increase compliance and control (Greenberg et al., 2003; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Kaler-Jones, 2020; Simmons, 2021).

In response to critiques, there have been recent calls to the field to seek equity-elaborated, anti-racist, and culturally specific SEL frameworks (Griffin et al., 2020; Jagers et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2020; Lesnick & Leahy, 2021). There is also evidence of college access programs utilizing SEL policy frameworks to advance social justice (Muñiz, 2019). While SEL contains components of greater well-being, college students tasked with learning and discovery, civic purpose, and meaningful living in the world also require additional

well-being considerations such as happiness, preferences, health, virtue, meaning, and purpose (Harward, 2016). While there is some college access research on the short and long-term impact of SEL initiatives (see Millett & Kevelson, 2020; Muñiz, 2019), the extent to which college access programs prioritize SEL as a component of greater well-being and the role and experience of staff remains understudied.

Overall, there is a scarcity of research on well-being and college access programs, which is problematic because stress and distress toward well-being are highest for college students during their first semester (Bewick et al., 2010). Therefore, addressing well-being needs during college access and transition remains critical. Additionally, much college access research focuses on the quantitative assessment of how federal programs increase college enrollment (Domina, 2009; Perna, 2015), which potentially misses important qualitative insights from private, state-funded, and community based organizations. Finally, there is a dearth of literature that highlights the perspectives of program staff, which potentially overlooks the crucial role that student-staff relationships play in sustaining the well-being of college-bound students.

Theoretical Framework

Gloria Anzaldúa's[3] (1987) work, Borderlands = La Frontera: A New Mestiza, is a foundational exploration into the processes, causes, and conditions of humans

encountering unnatural divisions, such as geopolitical and cultural. Using semi-autobiography poetry and prose, Anzaldúa highlights how Borderlands are "unnatural boundaries" (p.3) that cause its inhabitants physical, psychological, sexual, and spiritual challenges. As a result, some may encounter violence navigating multiple cultural identities and realities. Anzaldúa posits that a new consciousness is required (La conciencia de la mestiza) to achieve full emancipation and collective consciousness. This new way of living (el camino de la mestiza) often requires addressing painful and challenging experiences (la coatlicue state).

Borderlands theory is ideal for studying college access programs for several reasons. First, it embodies a collective approach to social interaction, embracing the inclusion of multiple social (and often conflicting) identities. Secondly, college access programs exist primarily due to an ongoing struggle to educate all students equitably (Coleman, 2011; Reardon, 2016). Given that Anzaldúa's perspective is from the oppressed, the marginalized, the immigrant, and the outsider, Borderlands theory and college access programs address similar populations. Third, college access programs are designed to prepare students to enter a new post-

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Anzaldúa writes with a lowercase "b" in borderlands to signify geographical borders, while a capital "B" signifies ideological Borderlands (Orozco-Mendoza, 2008). The same writing style is adopted here.

secondary educational space and culture, historically created for wealthy, White men and often abide by middle-class values and assumptions regarding student success (Green, 2003). Underrepresented students learn to navigate new cultural, academic, and sometimes geographic territories, not necessarily designed with them in mind (Patton et al., 2016). Borderlands theory provides a lens to understand the Borderland transition from high school to college.

Methodology

I employed narrative inquiry to examine college access staff experiences on supporting Black and Indigenous young women's well-being. Narrative inquiry is a methodology and a method of data collection and analysis to understand lived experiences (Clandinin & Caine, 2008; Esposito & Evans-Winter, 2022). Within a narrative approach, each story told is situated with a larger cultural and social context, emphasizing the relationship between the research and participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 43). Narrative analysis sample sizes can range from one to twenty-four in education studies (Debrah, 2021). Therefore, it is not necessary to have a large sample size for narrative studies to focus on the in-depth analysis of their stories or narratives (Wells, 2011); instead, it is most important to select participants that provide detailed and rich information on the issue being addressed (Debrah, 2021).

To frame the scope of this study, I utilize the definition of well-being as the balance point

between a resource pool and the challenges faced (Dodge et al., 2012). This definition of well-being aligns with Indigenous conceptions of well-being that follow the traditional medicine wheel and seek balance among spiritual, physical, mental, and contextual factors (Constantine et al., 2004; Rountree & Smith, 2016). Within Borderlands theory, la mestiza consciousness is a form of consciousness for those in Borderland spaces who push back on oppressive systems to reclaim Indigenous and feminist ways of knowing and being (Anzaldúa, 1987). A well-being consciousness is an expansion of the la mestiza consciousness that highlights how individuals embody a pluralist, inclusive way of life that may include contradictions and ambiguity on the path to liberation and well-being.

Participant Selection

This study utilized purposeful and snowball sampling. The main criteria for study participation were staff members with previous (within the past two years) or current employment with a college access organization and direct Black and Indigenous student interaction in their respective roles. I was particularly interested in how staff supported young women's well-being due to research indicating gendered differences in college, as well as research suggesting that the more marginalized identities that a student has, the lower their well-being tends to be (Brocato et al., 2021). Initial participant recruitment started with emailing local pre-college preparation/college access programs in several Midwestern United States with an

initial description of the study and interview solicitation. I also contacted professionals who disclosed current or previous employment within a college access program or organization.

The five participants (all names are chosen pseudonyms) represent various college access organizational types, including community-based non-profits, multi-city nonprofits, federally funded programs, private/corporate foundations, and college/university-specific programs (see Table 1 on next page). Four of the five participants worked at more than one college access organization over their professional lifetime; thus, their perspectives include multiple organizational experiences. These participants were selected as they represent different college access programs and experiences at different roles and levels of influence. Four of the five participants also identify as Black or Native American.

Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted one semi-structured interview with each staff member, lasting about 60-90 minutes. To allow the participant to uncover personal stories, experiences, and knowledge related to the changing needs of students' well-being, I asked questions such as "describe a student with a strong sense of well-being?", "how have you seen students helping one another to be well?" and "describe an activity that you found to address the well-being needs of students?" I also asked additional questions regarding institutional responses, personal challenges, and experiences supporting Black and

Table 1.
Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender	Position/Role	Organizational Type
Marie	50's	White	Woman	Admin	Field Specific (Edu)
Nife	30's	Black	Woman	Student Support	National Multi-City/ college specific
Omari	30's	Black	Man	Programming	National Multi-City
Jaime	20's	Native/ Menominee	Woman	Student Support	Federal Program
Jon	50's	Native/ Ho-Chunk	Man	Director	State Program

Indigenous young adult women's well-being in preparation for college.

For the first round of analysis, I followed a preliminary reconstructive analysis approach (Carspecken, 1996) with multiple rounds of coding. After reading each interview transcript, I first created short three-to-five-word sentences using the words of the participants. Then guided by Anzaldúa's la coatlicue state concept, I selected data sections that addressed well-being challenges. I determined all possible meanings for the selected data (meaning fields, Carspecken, 1996). The secondary analysis was a stratified analysis describing norms, power, actions, and values to understand meaningful acts in social communication and action. I then made higher-level inferences for each participant and their truth claims (assertions about what is right/wrong, good/bad, Carspecken, 1996). The final layer was to triangulate the primary and secondary higher-level codes for areas of convergence and divergence. Over the course of six months, I transcribed and coded data while interviewing additional participants until repetitive data emerged, as form of assumed saturation in the data (Creswell, 2018; Morse, 2007). I selected the final themes based on saturation that included each participant's data. For the final analysis, I searched for and re-analyzed data that opposed emergent findings.

Trustworthiness
To enhance credibility, I engaged in peer debriefing to by sharing preliminary data findings with two other college access researchers (Creswell & Miller, 2007). I also utilized member-checking techniques by sharing transcripts with participants to allow for clarifications or further expansion of their narrative (Merriam & Tisdale. 2016). While this study is not designed to generalize to all college access programs nationwide, it is intended to stir methodological and conceptual understandings of well-being and how it is situated in college-going spaces to inform future research and practice.

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Positionality

As a first-generation, liberal arts college-educated Black woman, racism and racialized stress have undoubtedly shaped my personal experiences as a student and scholar and influenced my career in higher education. My interest in studying well-being as a component of college access spaces largely stems from my experience working with college access programs as a former college admissions professional and as a former Associate Dean of Students. In these roles, I worked with many first-generation, Black and Indigenous college students navigating spaces not necessarily created for them. When students pulled away from student life as a form of self-care, the university administration at times viewed this disengagement negatively. While some accept a world where education and social emotional trauma are normal companions for minoritized students, I engage in research and practice with the assumption that education and well-being does not have to be negatively correlated. There is a path toward equitable well-being for all.

To that end, I embrace the motto of "nothing about us without us," Charlton (2000) within my research process. This commitment to well-being for all and to do no harm, especially for Indigenous communities, has manifested in research that centers Indigenous knowledge and experiences, and incorporates participatory action research elements into my research design. This includes consultation and collaboration with Indigenous scholars, youth, and community leaders to guide the research process, always moving at the speed of trust (brown, 2017). As the researcher, I am responsible for accurately synthesizing the thoughts and experiences of the participants by choosing and utilizing the appropriate methodological and theoretical tools. My professional experiences provided me the language and discourse to signal my familiarity with that world, which aided in establishing trust with my participants and yet created an ideal level of professional distance between myself and the participants. While a constructivist research philosophy assumes that total control and elimination of bias in research is impossible (Crotty, 1998; Ortlipp, 2008), I used reflexive journaling throughout the research process to keep me aware of presuppositions and experiences that influence my research.

Findings

The overall findings from the study suggest that pre-college preparation and college access staff were navigating multiple and sometimes conflicting or ambiguous well-being Borderlands between the college access program, student spaces, and partnering colleges and universities. In these Border spaces, staff noticed an increased need for student social and emotional support. However, they often faced several challenges in addressing these needs, including lack of training, time, capacity, or evaluative pressures. Conceptions and definitions of well-being expectantly varied amongst staff. However, they also revealed commonalities that centered awareness, the ability to reach

out or within, and helping others. There were also racialized and gendered expectations around well-being and what students should be able to do when well. The study findings are presented through the following themes: (1) Racialized and gendered well-being Borderlands, and (2) Threats and triumphs of well-being consciousness.

Racialized and Gendered Well-Being Borderlands

When asked to describe a student with a strong sense of well-being, Omari, a Black man who has worked as student support for multiple college access programs, responded on how he understood Black women's well-being as tied to her ability to be of service to others. He explains:

I think Black women's well-being, I've experienced it to always be in relation to other people's outcomes. So, like we want Black women to be well so they can show up for a Black man. We want Black women to be well so they can be strong and pillars of our community. Not we want Black women to be well for their own lives. I can't help but think about the many ways in which [it] is contingent.

In this passage, Omari articulated cultural expectations that he perceives are often placed upon Black women who tie their well-being to others, acknowledging the social influence of race and gender identity. Omari's lived experience of well-being speaks to how in some college access spaces, well-being may not be considered the only goal in educational spaces but also a means to other outcomes,

such as learning or providing care and support to others.

Nife, a Black woman who has worked at several college-access programs, expressed well-being for college women as tied to safety from physical, sexual, and verbal gendered violence. She explains:

I think a big part of wellness, while I was in college was maintaining safety and as a woman, so much of that is, is related to gender-based violence, including rape, including domestic violence, including…social violence that's like gender-based, and that could be like men consistently talking over you in class. …maybe not even in class but like in workplaces. So those sorts of like social violence where because of your gender, you're discounted.

Nife describes well-being as a state of awareness of the higher education social world and context in which college women experience gendered social violence. When asked if college access programs addressed this directly, Nife responded, "neither of them did a super stellar job of proactively addressing things", which suggests that some staff have racialized and gendered understandings of what it means for college women to be well, and due partly to their own experiences.

Unfortunately, several staff indicated that college access programs failed to proactively address the racial and gendered implications of well-being (see Table 2 on next page for additional examples of participants'

statements). However, there were multiple instances in which racist campus and community events propelled organizations into a reactive response.

For example, participants Marie, Omari, and Jon all described experiences where current college students would return to their home college-access programs and share troublesome campus experiences, looking for support and guidance. Omari described such an experience:

We started getting a lot of feedback from students like, "There's a lot of racism on this campus… I don't know how to navigate a racially toxic schooling climate." All these things started coming up…so after a lot of reflection, the organization realized, okay, well, we need to actually start talking to students about things like racial battle fatigue and racial identity.

Despite the reactive nature of the responses, staff shared that students found these initiatives to be helpful. For example, Omari's organization created a handbook to discuss and explain concepts such as racial battle fatigue and suggest how students could work through such challenges. Likewise, Jon, a 50-something Native man who has worked in college access spaces for 20 years, shared how his program carved out space for students to process racialized experiences on campus and in the broader community:

So, we take time because we meet so many times with our students throughout the school year, we're able to take time to process through that

with them. This recent homecoming controversy... and [young Black teen] …so he was shot by the police on [named] street here towards the neighborhood…and so our students had to stew all day… They stewed all day, and that was the major topic of conversation for the community… yeah, so we shifted our plan to do that so that we could, if we must, we can ditch whatever was planned for the day and do x.

Each staff member shared stories of where former students returned to share racist incidents on their respective college campuses and communities, indicating the potential ongoing organizational influence that college access programs have in students' lives through high school, college, and beyond. Similar to Anzaldua's coatlicue state or painful experience to force introspection and transformation, these incidents often catalyzed college-access programs to respond and facilitate opportunities to process how these experiences negatively influence college students. This passage also highlights how former students initiated the coatlicue state within college access Borderlands by returning to their home pre-college access programs to share these experiences and seek support.

Threats and Triumphs to Well-Being Consciousness

During the interviews, staff were asked to define their conceptions of well-being. Marie identifies as a white woman in her 50s and works as a student social support programming coordinator. She

Table 2.
Additional Participant Quotes by Theme.

	Racialize & Gendered Well-Being	Threats & Triumphs of Well-Being Consciousness
Marie	"My son, a middle, you know, middle income white boy… came to this campus, and also struggled, you go to a high school and it's diverse… And you come to this campus, and it's not so diverse."	"The freshmen at [institution] come and talk to the high school students…a big part of the conversation was them talking about, resources for mental health. That was eye-opening for me."
Nife	"[there] were sort of the extreme examples of violence against women…the organization did not handle well at all…I would say that the organization handled it poorly."	"There was a profile of folks who would consistently target and harass [students]… for the organization to not explicitly require us to prepare students with color to walk into that environment was extremely problematic."
Omari	"I would take my time to really socialize black students to the notion of wellness…and then rebuilding from that point, centering wellness in your life, and understanding the precarity of how race and class, all that, impacts it."	"So, we didn't go after the structural or policy changes, or critique structures and policies at the organizations that we sent our students because to do so would probably put at risk our ability to send students to those places."
Jaime	"Native students particularly in higher education is understanding what their well-being is in the context of higher ed versus at home."	"Some of these- particularly these student organizations, man, they're powerful things…finding the space to be vulnerable to say, "yeah, this is hard for me too." but we're gonna get through this together."
Jon	"And she still has a social justice orientation. So, she can deal with tough issues that are important but have a positive growth-oriented perspective within that."	"Have you been to a football game yet? Bloody Mary bars and alcohol right across the plaza…we have to police this area… make sure that we don't have nonsense going on."

conceptualized well-being for students as partly an exercise in reaching out to ask for help. She recalled:

I have a couple of students that really have struggled… we got to talking, and I said… find out what your options are. And it was just a matter of, like, talking it out… you just need to reach out and know where your resources are.

Marie believed that students are well if they know how and when to ask for help and where resources are available. She frames well-being as reaching out to the right resources to get what you need to succeed.

Jon and Nife also expressed that well-being includes knowing your resources to get you what you need and reaching out (see Table 2). Alternatively, Omari and Jaime viewed well-being as a combination of reaching out for help but mostly reaching in to identify personal needs, inner joys, and strength from within. For example, Omari sees well-being as a socialization process that includes internal reflection:

How do I hope Black students identify post-secondary pathways that will bring them the most joy? I would take my time to really socialize black students to the notion of wellness, how to define it

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for themselves, and then how to create a college-going path that centers wellness in your life and understanding the precarity of how race and class impact it. Let's then create individual and collective journeys to identifying and pursuing a college path such that you at least know what wellness means to you, and then you can make decisions based from that.

Omari views internal reflection and awareness as a crucial component of well-being and that college access programs can play a role in facilitating such opportunities for greater awareness. Except for Marie, who focused more on reaching out, this pattern of reaching inward was mentioned by all other staff, who identified as either Black or Indigenous, hinting at how staff's racial identity may shape whether and how they assist students in navigating well-being. The concept of reaching within especially expressed by Jon and Jaime, aligned with an Anzaldúan concept of consciousness, which involves inner reflection to undue internalized oppressive traditions while also externally working toward collective liberation. For example, Jon described what he believes is an exemplar of a young Indigenous woman with high well-being:

She's the kind of person that everybody wants to be around. And she's got poise… got self-confidence. I think she has an expectation of success. She wants to bring others along with her on the journey of success, not tear others down to go forward, so she has a sense of community… And she still has a social justice orientation. So, she can deal with tough issues that are important but have a positive growth-oriented perspective.

In addition to the individual attributes of confidence and high expectations, Jon also sees collective support, community, and social justice as components of what it means for students to be well, indicating that students may be perceived to be well when they help others do the same. This suggests that some staff members have expectations of well-being that include what students should do and how they should perform well-being within a particular space.

A significant threat to well-being consciousness that arose through the narratives was competing with administrative and philanthropic demands to meet postsecondary enrollment numbers. Specifically, the myopic focus on college enrollment created tensions for staff who desired to address other concerns but had neither the institutional resources nor the structural support to follow through. Marie and Omari shared such tensions:

Marie:
I still have to give reports to the Dean, and she would say, you know, 'This kid doesn't even have a 2.0. What are they doing in this program?' 'There's no way they're gonna get into [selective public university], much less anywhere else.'

Omari:
So, we didn't go after the structural or policy changes, or critique structures and policies at the organizations that we sent our students because to do so would probably put at risk our ability to send students to those places. I don't think as an organization we wanted to ruffle feathers… and

the consequences of doing so, at least at the time, didn't appear to be worth losing benefits. Like we got checks to make sure we got students into high-quality university seats, period…These funders did not give a [expletive] about how our students felt at [these] institutions.

While program staff desired to prioritize the well-being and health of the students, they perceived that well-being support could not come at the expense of ensuring college enrollment goals. These findings suggest that program staff had to reconcile their desires to support students with the expectation of outcome-based productivity in college-going spaces.

Unfortunately, even when students embraced a culturally responsive well-being consciousness, their efforts were not always legitimized by the higher education institution, as indicated by participant Jaime, who identified as Native American/ Menominee, and worked at several college access programs to support Indigenous students. She shared a time when a student tried to implement a culturally responsive intervention for her well-being:

I had a student who was struggling because she wasn't feeling well, and she went home and, talked to her spiritual advisor, and, really was guided in a particular way… so when she went back to an institution, they asked her for a doctor's note. And they wouldn't take that spiritual advisor's word because it wasn't a quote-on-quote, credentialed doctor.

This example highlights how the perceived cultural capital of Indigenous well-being practice (i.e., whether the healer has "credentials") shapes the university's response. Thus, even when students tried to implement culturally responsive efforts, their efforts were not always accepted by their institutions. This narrative also reveals that students are again returning to college access programs for help post-college enrollment and highlights the ongoing need for persistence support even after formally leaving their college access programs. Finally, while staff struggled at times to prioritize or advocate for student well-being, especially to partner colleges and universities, there were times that staff bore witness to culturally affirming student-led practices that improved the well-being of one another. Nife spoke of experiencing students reaching out for support and resources on behalf of other students. Nife explains:

So that could be that there was student A who would say to a staff member, 'Hey, student B has this and that going on and you know, I don't think things are going well, like you should talk to that student about it.' I really noticed that student B was super homesick…and part of the homesickness was that student B missed, missed their mom's Mac and cheese. And so, we found a soul food place and got some Mac and cheese … there were times where students took those things into their own hands and either made staff aware of it or, kind of did what they thought was right to do in terms of directing the other student to a resource that they think might have been helpful.

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In this experience, students engaged in caregiving and proxying care work on behalf of other current and former program students. As a staff member, Nife shifted the traditional power hierarchy between staff and students. Instead, she served as secondary support to honor students' leadership on how to care for themselves and others. Omari also shared the experience of watching students step up to encourage one another when faced with deficit-based and anti-black language from other educators. Omari shares one instance of working in a high school with a school counselor:

I would be in a financial aid session with students and, like a guidance counselor, would come in and say, "You all are in this class because you didn't do what you were supposed to do when you came here as freshmen, so this is your last chance to get your lives together." And I'd be like, "Wow." But I would then hear students say, once that guidance counselor would leave ... I'll never forget this one student. She was like, "We're good. We're trying our best. Um, everybody's gonna succeed." And like I remember her saying this out loud in the class to like her fellow students once the guidance counselor left.

These narratives illuminate how threats to a well-being consciousness came from both high school and college environments. In the face of deficit frameworks or lack of an organizational response, students occasionally took matters into their own hands, while college access staff bore witness.

Discussion

This study explored the well-being preparation environment of college access programs from the perspectives of program staff. Previous college access evaluations stressed that program staff have a shared commitment with program directors to support students (Swail & Perna, 2002). One main finding from this study suggests that program staff see the need to support and foster student well-being. However, conceptions of and implementation of well-being initiatives vary by program. This aligns with recent research on the ambiguities around defining well-being in educational spaces (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018; Travia et al., 2020) and thus stresses the need for college access programs to collectively define well-being goals from a culturally sustaining philosophy that embeds student culture into the process (D'Andrea Martínez, 2021; Waterman et al., 2018; Wicker, 2022). Additionally, Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory is a powerful framework for seeing cultural contradictions and ambiguities between the high school, college access, and college campus environments.

Furthermore, staff in this study acknowledged that their organizations often failed to address well-being concerns proactively. For example, Nife shared that her organizations did not address gendered violence until after an incident. Marie, Omari, and Jon also shared how their organizations reacted to racialized campus and community

incidents. This aligns with current literature that argues that few programs explicitly address educational, psychological, and social needs, especially for Black women (Jones, 2021). However, as students seemed surprised by their experiences on campus, providing proactive programming that acknowledges the connection between identity and well-being and the process of striving for well-being in a potentially oppressive environment could improve well-being consciousness in college access spaces.

These narratives illuminate how processing and protecting students from painful racialized experiences and gendered violence often catalyzed program staff and students to address well-being concerns. Similar to Anzaldúa's concept of la Coatlicue State, or painful experiences that increase consciousness, this study reveals how students continue to need well-being support both pre- and post-matriculation due to college campus climate and racialized events. Students, too, were engaged in collective well-being support for one another, supporting previous research on the vital role of peers for social and emotional support (Mishra, 2020), yet offering new contributions on the role and integration of staff within student-led initiatives. Program staff were navigating multiple college-access Borderlands between the organization, the students, and the partnering colleges, trying to bridge organizational efforts with students' desire to proxy care work for themselves and process racialized events on college campuses and in the broader community. College access

program staff used their agency and tools to support students by sharing personal knowledge and wisdom, abnegating power, and bearing witness to the culturally responsive proxy care work led by students.

Finally, the lack of proactive well-being support also appears to result from other competing priorities, such as college enrollment goals. Given that federal college access programs were designed to increase college enrollment for underrepresented student groups (Domina, 2009), it is not surprising that high school completion and post-secondary enrollment rates remain the primary measures of success for these programs and organizations. However, other research highlights the detrimental role of outcome and productivity-led programming in community and youth spaces (Baldridge, 2014). Findings from this study highlight the day-to-day tensions and perceived consequences that college access program staff have in advocating for students, especially to the partnering colleges and universities.

Implications

This study highlights several areas for future research. The first is that more qualitative studies are needed to provide insight into college access staff perspectives on the journey to well-being and collegiate preparation. Second, longitudinal datasets should consider including indices of well-being in their data collection and measurement to be tracked by organizations

over time. Third, as Black girls have unique educational experiences (Blackmon & Coyle, 2017; Byrd, 2021; Patton et al., 2016), qualitative and quantitative studies should consider intersecting identities, particularly race and gender, in shaping well-being pedagogy and practice.

Likewise, this study underscores three opportunities for staff and administrators. The first is that college access programs should consider including well-being to indicate student success in their agreements with their respective higher education partners. This can further ensure that organizations will proactively address greater well-being as an outcome for all college-bound students, especially Black and Indigenous women attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Secondly, college access programs should consider building proactive student programming designed toward well-being discovery and preparation for potential threats to well-being (i.e., racist treatment), assuming that students of color are likely to experience racialized stress on college campuses with known racial hostility incidents (Beyer, 2017; Davis et al., 2004; Nghe & Mahalik, 2001). Third, consider incorporating organizational responses and

advocacy for student well-being on college campuses, including embedding and centering Indigenous, informal, and culturally responsive well-being practices.

Conclusion

With many college access programs dedicated to supporting first-generation, low-income, underrepresented, and otherwise minoritized student populations, this study provides critical knowledge and accountability to those who profess to support our most vulnerable student populations. As college access programs have the potential to shape college enrollment trends around persistence and retention, this study contributes asset-based and relational well-being research that moves away from deficit models that place the responsibility of well-being solely on the students to include organizations as integral to fostering well-being. Additionally, Black women and girls represent only one percent of educational scholarship (Byrd, 2021; Young et al., 2021), and Indigenous students are often made invisible by the lack of representation in educational research (Shotton et al., 2013). This study contributes vital data within a research drought. Much is at stake, and educational vigilance and culturally relevant

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practice to promote authentic opportunities for Black and Indigenous college-going women to flourish in educational spaces remain imperative. JCA

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